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Treeless response from states

IT does not speak too well of co-ordination between the Federal planners and implementing authorities if targets are not achieved. The National Tree Planting Campaign is one illuminating example. Launched amid much fanfare last March, with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself planting the first tree, the organisers had set a target of 750,000 for the first year of the campaign's three-year duration. But the response so far from most States has been very disappointing.

Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Dr Ting Chew Peh revealed on Tuesday that, according to reports from the States, only 150,000 trees have been planted after eight months, which is far below the numbers planned. All but three States have met less than 30 per cent of their individual targets. Worse, two or three States have not even filed a report which led the Minister to assume that they had not planted a single tree. In other words, they have made no effort at all towards their targets. This rate of non-achievement is unacceptable.

Although responsibility for the national campaign falls mainly on the Housing and Local Government Ministry, it has to get the job done through the local authorities. The latter are the agencies who will have to implement the campaign at ground level. In many areas they are the only link with the village development or welfare committees.

However, the figures show that the local authorities were either lackadaisical, indifferent or simply did not grasp the significance of the tree-planting campaign. The planting of trees is not merely an exercise in decoration. It is intended to green the vicinity in which we live. Very often new housing estates are nothing but barren row upon row of box-like structures, each no different from any other. Such living environments are not only unpleasant to look at but are uncomfortably hot to live in. Trees provide not only the pleasure of greenery but also a cooling effect to the houses and the people who live in them.

Calling for explanatory reports from the States is not an answer to the problem of their poor response. It would be far more effective for the Federal authorities to liaise closely with State officials. It is quite obvious that the latter have not been told of the importance of the campaign as statistics on the number of trees planted and the non-response of two or three States clearly manifest.

This lack of communication should not recur especially now that the Housing and Local Government Ministry is formulating a National Landscaping Policy aimed at creating a Garden Nation by the year 2005. As Ting made clear in his speech at the National Landscape Conference, landscaping is no longer a peripheral activity but a component of development that must be incorporated into planning at an early stage. Such a concept has been a part of the planning of the new cities of Putra Jaya and Cyberjaya. Where development projects are concerned, the concept calls for land to be set aside for green lungs. Houses must then be built in groups that would be linked by a green network.

The concept will remain a lofty ideal if the local authorities, who are the approving bodies of any housing project, are not briefed on and convinced of the policy. Only then will we get better results to the much simpler objective of planting 20 million trees by the year 2020.

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